

Belinda Castles, *Hannah & Emil* (Allen & Unwin, 2012)

For lovers of historical fiction, the third novel from The Australian/Vogel's Literary Award winning author Belinda Castles, *Hannah & Emil*, seems like the perfect reading choice for an afternoon in the sun, or an evening by the fire. Woven through with dreamy prose and poignant anecdotes, the story follows the fictionalised lives of the author's grandparents – a fact revealed by the author in a note at the beginning of the book. Hannah, a Russian Jew, leaves London and works as a translator in Brussels, where she meets Emil, a veteran of World War One, who has had to flee his hometown and leave his family. The two fall in love, and settle briefly in England before Emil is shipped to the harsh, wartime climate of Australia for being an enemy of war. Castles' narrative is elegant, and provides an interesting perspective on persecution, loneliness, endurance and determination born of love. It has all the makings for a timeless romance, denoted by the cover of the book which depicts a laughing, embracing couple. I wondered momentarily if they were the author's grandparents.

Ultimately, this epic tale of hardship and cross-continental love failed to engage me. I began *Hannah & Emil* with a clean slate, because historical fiction is not a genre which I have much familiarity with, or enthusiasm for. Yet there were other reasons why the text didn't engage me. Castles was trying to do too much: her primary incentive for writing *Hannah & Emil* wasn't clear. Was the author's desire a personal one to pay homage to her grandparents? Or did the consideration of their personalities simply serve to flesh out characters who occupied roles in the greater picture of World War Two? I couldn't help but wonder if Castles was too close to her subject material. In an interview with Angela Meyer,¹ Castles commented on the fact that she had some memory of her grandmother to work with, but only had impressions of her grandfather.

One of *Hannah & Emil*'s greatest strengths is Castles' grasp of humanity. Her characters are flawed, vulnerable, and courageous, displaying great endurance and possessing an astonishing capacity for love and loyalty. Hannah voices a secret hope that 'the nib of my pen would break open the skin of the world' (165). This quote, while referring to Hannah's desire to venture out from the secluded family life she has experienced so far, is an apt indicator of her fearless attitude to life. When she meets Emil, wandering in a traumatised state after leaving Germany, a great tenderness develops between them that is particularly striking given that both Hannah and Emil are very independent, uncompromising characters. It is Hannah's first experience with a man:

And then I must have slept again, because I woke briefly to a thing entirely new to me: I was lying on my side, with a man's knees tucked up behind mine, his body repeating the shape of my own, the weight of his hand resting on my waist, the light breath of his sleep rushing softly past my ear. (221)

At this point in the text, the slow-moving plot begins to come to life. The narrative until now has followed the protagonists' lives separately: this provides context for their different backgrounds, but the plot felt disconnected and drifting. Emil's character is less defined than

¹Angela Meyers, 'Treasures from the Past: Belinda Castles on Hannah & Emil,' *LiteraryMinded* 20 September, 2012 <http://literaryminded.wordpress.com/2012/09/20/treasures-from-the-past-belinda-castles-on-hannah-and-emil/>

Hannah's; his nature is somewhat reserved, hinting at the trauma he has undergone, and the fact that the reader meets him as he is being forced to leave his home seems to set the tone for the unfolding of his narrative, wherein he is mostly a solitary figure, alienated largely due to his anti-Nazi beliefs when in Germany then his German heritage when in England. He is a solitary figure, a fact that contributes to the loveliness of the humanity in the relationship that develops between him and Hannah, who is forthright and fiercely loving.

Once Hannah and Emil meet, I found myself drawn into the dynamics of their relationship, reading on in order to discover if the protagonists prevail against extraordinarily bleak odds and end up together; ultimately, this is the factor that lends the most strength to an otherwise unremarkable text. While Castles loosely bases Hannah and Emil's story on that of her grandparents, most of the plot is fictionalised. The knowledge of this fact lent a strange double-awareness to the narrative as I read what it related, and simultaneously wondered exactly what Castles had researched and at what point she crossed over into fiction. In the prologue – set in Sydney, 2005 – Flora remembers her grandmother Hannah, and the suitcase of memorabilia that she left her. This introduction doesn't seem to serve a purpose other than to contextualise the last section of the book where a middle-aged Hannah wishes to gift the baby Flora with a story: to be precise, the half of the story that is hers to give. This element of what the reader might assume to be thinly disguised autobiographical fiction does little to enhance the integrity of the text, and once again recalls the sticking point that I couldn't move past: Castles' familial investment in the story she tells is very apparent, and inevitably hinders the narrative by undermining the strength of and objectivity toward Hannah and Emil.

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